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ABSTRACT

This first publication in the "Who's Raising the Family" series covers the critical issue of family communications and how parents and adolescents can talk and listen to each other about alcohol and other drugs (AOD). Communication between parents and children is crucial in preventing alcohol and other drug use. While peer relationships take on increasing importance as children enter their teen years, it remains true that what parents think matters, even to teenagers. This booklet suggests some ways to encourage conversation with adolescent children and emphasizes the importance of the example that parents set in the home. Communication styles vary with different cultures and types of family structure, but no matter what communication style the family uses, setting rules for the child and sharing expectations is critical. Research makes it clear that adolescents value guidance from parents on alcohol and other drugs, but the way that guidance is offered affects how effectively the message is heard. In addition to effective communication within the family, parents must extend communication to their children's friends and the parents of those friends. Active listening to teenagers takes practice, but an open and supportive relationship will help protect the adolescent from AOD. Thirteen resource organizations are listed for further information. (Contains 23 references.) (SLD)

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A PARENTING SKILLS SERIES FOR FAMILIES WITH ADOLESCENT CHILDRE

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to listen and to learn

exploring opportunities to encourage family communication

EDITED BY
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WISCONSIN CLEARINGHOUSE

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exploring opportunities to encourage family communication

from "Who's Raising the Family?"
one of a series published by Wisconsin Clearinghouse for Prevention Resources

edited by
Karen Bankston
Diane Franklin

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The joys of parents are secret,
and so are their griefs and fears.

FRANCIS BACON

Oh, what a tangled web do parents weave
When they think that their children are naïve.

OGDEN NASH

You are entitled to your childhood, safety and hope.

MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

adolescence is a time of unique rewards and challenges for parents and children alike.

Adolescence is a time of unique rewards and challenges for parents and children alike. In their preteen and teenage years, our children embrace new independence. They face more difficult assignments in school, additional responsibilities at home, and perhaps even their first employment. They tune in increasingly to the world around them, a different world in many ways than the one in which we grew up. The growing pains we experienced in high school now confront middle school students. There is a greater risk for drug abuse than ever before. Illicit drugs are more widely available and more dangerous.

Not so long ago, our children were riding tricycles and singing their ABCs. It may be hard to accept that they now know which of their fellow students can get beer, cigarettes, or marijuana. They often know where smokers and drug users their age congregate after school. A 1998 survey by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University warns that age 13 is a major turning point for American young people. At that age, accessibility to alcohol and other drugs increases, and attitudes shift about reporting student drug users and communicating openly with parents and teachers.

Much has been written about how much influence parents wield in their children's development. You may hear arguments that parents' contributions are limited to genetics, that adolescents model themselves after peers not parents, that parents' role modeling and preventive parenting approaches are overshadowed by television, advertising, movies, the Internet, and numerous other factors within our society. While these influences do affect our children, the majority of research throughout recent years demonstrates that parents are among the most important influences in a child's life.

As individuals, children are affected differently by nature (genetics) and nurture (parental upbringing and other environmental factors). Family makeup and circumstances, physical surroundings, educational and spiritual experiences, physical and emotional health, and relationships with peers and other significant people all have an impact. What we as parents do and say is not the only influence in our children's lives, but our words and actions are crucial. In survey after survey, adolescents report that a caring relationship with their parents and other care-givers, parental monitoring, and clear expectations that they abstain from alcohol and other drugs are responsible for their decision to stay drug-free. At the very least, we cannot expect our children to follow family rules and maintain a healthy lifestyle if we do not demonstrate by our words and actions how to do so.

This series is designed for parents of middle school students who want to help their children steer clear of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs. This publication and accompanying booklets on related topics advocate that parents practice *prevention*. This proactive approach is designed to protect your child's physical and emotional well-being and instill positive life skills such as critical thinking and decision making to lay the foundation for a healthy future. This series was developed through a collaborative effort with parents and professionals in child development and alcohol and other drug abuse prevention fields who share our philosophy of education, connection to family, and community involvement. Many of our contributors practice prevention both personally and professionally.

The Wisconsin Clearinghouse for Prevention Resources, through this series and all our publications and services, is committed to cultural awareness. We strive to make real connections with people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds to build common understanding. The contributors to this series come from many different cultures. Whenever possible, we have included parenting traditions of specific cultures and ethnic groups that may be helpful to us all.

Our aim is to speak to all types of families with children of middle school age. Some families have two parents living together, while others share parenting responsibilities from different households. Single parents and blended families, with children from past and present relationships, sometimes face special challenges. So do older adults raising their grandchildren. Multigenerational households are common in some cultures. In other families, children rarely see their grandparents because of distance and other factors. Previous literature has focused on the joys and specific issues different types of families face. We will focus here on what we all have in common: a desire for our children to grow up happy, healthy, and drug-free.

This first publication in the *Who's Raising the Family?* series covers the critical issue of family communications, how parents and adolescents can talk and listen to each other about alcohol and other drug use. Other publications in this series address:

- Time management and stress reduction for parents and children
- Ways to forge strong parent-child relationships in the preteen and teen years
- Responsibility, discipline, and anger management for parents and children
- Recommendations for parents whose children may be using alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs

Like children, families are unique. No one knows your family better than you do. The suggestions included in this series are just that. The examples and exercises we offer are intended as illustrations. Feel free to adapt these ideas to suit your family and to use your own words when discussing the concepts here with friends and family members.

We cannot set aside an hour for discussion with our children
and hope that it will be a time of deep encounter.
The special moments of intimacy are more likely to happen
while baking a cake together, or playing hide and seek,
or just sitting in the waiting room of the orthodontist.

NEIL KURSHAN, *RAISING YOUR CHILD TO BE A MENSCH*

One important reason to stay calm is that
calm parents hear more.
Low-key, accepting parents are the ones whose children keep talking.

MARY PIPHER, *REVIVING OPHELIA*

Look up the term communication in the dictionary, and you'll discover a fine example of understatement.

"An act or instance of transmitting," the dry text reads. "A process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior."

FAMILY COMMUNICATION: THE CORE OF PREVENTION

We will expand on that definition a great deal here, because communications between parents and your adolescent children is so crucial in preventing alcohol and other drug use. Here are some examples of the role communication plays in the decisions your child must make about alcohol and other drugs:

- Your daughter formed her earliest impressions about alcohol and cigarettes based on how you and other significant adults in her life used those substances and talked about them. She knows from years of memorable family get-togethers that it's possible to have fun without drinking. She understands why Grandma sends Grandpa out on the front porch when he smokes, and she's talked with him about how much he'd like to quit smoking.

- One of your son's favorite pastimes as you watch Sunday afternoon football together is ridiculing those commercials that sell beer while advising viewers to "know when to say when." He gets a kick out of dissecting the images advertisers, TV directors, and moviemakers use. You started playing that "game" with him when he was a kindergartner.

- It's taken a while to work the bugs out, but your stepdaughter finally understands that she follows your household rules during the weekends she spends with you. When she's going out, you want to know where she's going and whom she's going with. If her plans change, she calls to let you know where she'll be. And when she's invited to a party, you always call her host's parents to make sure they'll be on hand — no matter how much that practice embarrasses her.

- You hear from a fellow parent that one of your 12-year-old's classmates was suspended for smuggling a can of beer into a school dance. You decide this is a perfect conversation starter to reiterate your family rules prohibiting drinking, smoking, and other drug use. It's also a good time to help your child practice what he'd say if a friend offered him a beer.

Of course, you're communicating with your child even when you're not talking. The family parties in a previous example communicated that alcohol is not a necessary ingredient for having fun. As a parent or guardian, you are a powerful role model, even as your child becomes a teenager. The decisions you make about using alcohol and other drugs speak as loudly as your opinions voiced during family discussions.

Missing from the dictionary definition is one critical component about communication: It is a two-way medium. In scientific terms, it requires a transmitter and receiver at both ends. Family communication is not simply a matter of parents talking and children listening. Your child will be much more likely to hear and accept your message if you are willing to listen to what she has to say. Take the time to listen to what your child wants to share with you — even if you could care less about hearing a line-by-line replay of the funniest scene in last night's movie. By doing so, you increase the likelihood that she'll be willing to talk about the things you really want to hear about.

Mary Jo, who works at home as a child care provider, was offered the director's position at a before- and after-school child care program in the area. She was interested in the prospect but realized it would mean she would not be home when her kids got home after school. As she discussed the offer with her husband Mike, they decided to ask their three children what they thought about it. Daughter Cosmena was then 12 1/2, and sons Shadrick and Loklan were ages 11 and 10, respectively.

"I thought at that age they might be very willing to have me gone for a while," Mary Jo recalls. "They were certainly independent enough that they could come home after school, fix their own snacks and be on their own for a while."

What Mary Jo heard surprised her and helped cinch the decision. First Cosmena and then her brothers said they liked having Mom home after school, available to talk about what happened at school and offer homework help.

WHAT TO TALK ABOUT?

This publication is specifically about how parents and your adolescent children can communicate effectively about alcohol and other drugs, so we'd better dispel a common misconception up-front.

Myth: Now that my child is a teenager, the days when I had any influence are long gone. She cares more about what her friends think than what I think.

Reality: It's true that prevention efforts in the home can and should begin early. And it's true that peer relationships take on increasing importance as children enter their teen years. It's equally true that what parents think matters — even to teenagers.

cues to encourage conversation

- Drop the interrogation. Routine questions ("How was school today?") typically reap routine responses ("OK"), while a barrage of questions sounds more often like the third degree than parental interest.

  Mary Jo and Mike Flocca have a standing offer of a "free ride home" for their three adolescent children. If they're ever in a situation where alcohol, tobacco or other drugs are being passed around, "we've told them, 'Call us and we'll come and get you, no questions asked,'" Mary Jo explains. "We're not going to grill them on what happened. But later on, we're hoping, they'll come and talk to us about it."

- Be ready when they are. When your son walks through the door after school, he may be more interested in getting to the refrigerator than chatting about what happened in science class. But be ready to lay the newspaper aside or hit the mute button on the TV remote when he's ready to talk.

- Show your interest. When your daughter talks to you, show that you're listening. Respond with comments that let her know you're following every word. Even short phrases like "Really?" and "hmmm..." are encouraging. Look at her when she talks. Acknowledge her feelings, but avoid making assumptions and heavy judgments.

- Keep up your end. Share tidbits about your day, odd encounters, and funny stories. You might even ask advice on small matters: "I want to get your cousin a little something now that she's passed her driving test. What do you think she would like?" Involve your child in family decisions, from where to take the next vacation to which movie to see. In short, talk to her the way you'd like her to talk to you.

- Make time to talk. Busy lives are a universal reality these days, and it seems like the older your child gets, the less time your family has together. Build in a few minutes every day that you spend with your child: on the way to school in the morning, around the dinner table at least a few evenings a week, walking the dog before lights out.

  Living in a rural area, Doug and Sandy have spent a lot of time driving their kids to and fro, and Doug finds that drive time a great time to talk. "You've got a captive audience," he says with a laugh. "They can't bolt out the door." He's also picked up a lot of information about his children's social lives and high school days from conversations overheard while driving them and their friends around. "You get three or four kids in the back seats, and it's amazing what they say. It's like you're not even there."

A parent's guidance is crucial to your preteen or teenage child. For example, two recent studies identify the influence of family ties and parental supervision as strong protective factors in adolescents' decisions to steer clear of alcohol and other drugs. One study was reported in the article "Protecting Adolescents from Harm" in the Sept. 10, 1997, issue of *The Journal of the American Medical Association.* The second, a 1995 study sponsored by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, also supports the connection between parental attachment and supervision and children's choices to abstain from drinking, smoking, or other illicit drugs.

Four parental factors have been demonstrated to have a major influence on children's decisions:

1. Parents' use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs
2. Parents' attitudes and beliefs about alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use
3. Family management techniques
4. Communications between parents and children

The Center for Substance Abuse Prevention calls the family "the earliest and most enduring influence on the child." An adolescent from a family with alcohol and other drug problems is at risk for developing problems that can be passed from generation to generation. Other family-based risk factors include: conflict and domestic violence; lack of family cohesion; social isolation; heightened family stress; family attitudes favorable to drug use; ambiguous, lax, or inconsistent rules and sanctions regarding drug use; and poor child supervision and discipline practices.

On the other hand, families can help children resist alcohol and other drugs by instilling a sense that they are loved, that they are competent, and that they can look forward to a bright future. Research has identified these protective factors: a structured and nurturing family; family stability and cohesiveness; clear behavior guidelines; plenty of attention during the first year of life; parents who promote learning; and a warm, close relationship with a parent or caregiver. The more of these factors children can depend on, the less likely they are to develop problems with alcohol and other drug use.

Of particular importance is parental monitoring, knowing where your child is and what he's doing. A 1994 study reported in the journal *Pediatrics* notes that:

> Strongly monitored adolescents are, in essence, doubly protected from substance use involvement. They have the protective benefits of effective socialization in the family and, because they themselves are less likely to begin using drugs, they are less likely to find themselves in situations in which they will be exposed to drug-using friends.

what's wrong with "just one drink"?

As you consider family rules regarding alcohol and other drugs, you or your partner may suggest permitting your child to drink alcohol at home on special occasions. "After all," this line of reasoning goes, "my parents started letting me have a glass of wine at special family dinners when I was 12 and I didn't turn into an alcoholic."

Before you agree to such an exception, consider these implications:

- Alcohol consumption is illegal for people age 21 and under. If you don't obey the law in your home, why would you expect your child to honor it elsewhere?
- The earlier kids start drinking alcohol, the more likely they are to develop problems with alcohol and other drugs later in life.
- Giving alcohol special status implies that people must drink to celebrate and that drinking alcohol is a reward for growing up.
- Allowing your child to drink at home presents other thorny questions. Will you serve alcohol to your child's underage friends, too?
- If your child enjoys the "adult" status of sipping a drink at home, how likely do you think he will be to turn down alcohol whenever someone offers it elsewhere?

Even if they only have one or two drinks, teenagers are more vulnerable to the mind-altering and physical effects of alcohol. All too often, young people who drink socially often end up involved in dangerous binge drinking, the cause of many serious, sometimes fatal, car crashes and other accidental injuries.

Research continues to focus on alcohol's role as a "gateway drug," but surveys indicate that adolescents who smoke marijuana and use other illicit drugs started out by drinking alcohol. Another grim fact is that young people who drink or use illicit drugs are more likely to be victims or perpetrators of violence, engage in unprotected sex, and experience school failure.

GIVING ADOLESCENCE ITS DUE

Adolescence has certainly gotten a bad rap. Somewhere, maybe about the time James Dean started making movies, the image of surly, rebellious, disrespectful teenagers sprung up and has persisted through several decades, updated with a boom box here and a nose ring there. It's not uncommon to hear parents of toddlers confide, "They're so much fun at this age, but I'm not looking forward to adolescence." Some parents may be thinking back to their own troubled years as preteens and teenagers.

The truth is that kids don't become monsters when they enter middle school. Sure, they hanker for more independence and start developing their own tastes in music and fashion. They have their own, sometimes seemingly arbitrary, opinions. Adolescents can be occasionally moody and sensitive to anything they perceive as criticism.

At the same time, talking with your child can be lots of fun. Many kids in their early teens have a natural curiosity about the world around them. They offer a fresh perspective on topics like politics, the environment, and health and lifestyle issues. Your child will likely enjoy "adult" conversations on those and other topics as much as you will. And the more you talk about day-to-day subjects, the more easily you can talk about tougher, more sensitive topics.

In his book, *Familyhood: Nurturing the Values that Matter,* Dr. Lee Salk notes that young people's quest for individuality is not rebellion, but a step in the natural progression to adulthood:

> A teenager is engaged in a ferocious internal struggle to be separate and different from Mom and Dad. Appearance is a perfect example of that struggle in action. Fads in clothing and hairstyle catch on quickly among teenagers, part of the statement each teen is making that he's an individual who isn't anything at all like his parents. In their struggle to be individuals, teens, paradoxically, slavishly conform to other individuals — other teens. If you can accept disreputable clothes in informal situations and show some respect for your child's preferences, it gives you a bit of leverage. When you're going some place nice with your teenager, you can say, 'Look, I think those pants are great, but what I'd like you to do tonight is dress up a little bit more.' More likely than not, you'll get a 'Sure.'

Salk also recommends that you respect your child for what he knows. "Let your teenager tell you a few things and learn what you can—how to program the VCR or make mocha fudge," he suggests. "A parent's respectful acceptance of his teen's remarkable, funny, irritating differences opens the door to a loving and compatible relationship."

In the Search Institute's booklet *Parenting with a Purpose,* writers Dean Feldmeyer and Eugene Roehlkepartain note, "Parents who involve youth in family decisions, listen to their

perspectives on current issues, and welcome friends into the home give teenagers opportunities to develop social competencies and a positive identity."

The 1994 study in *Pediatrics* found that children who said their parents spent time and communicated with them often were less likely to start using alcohol and tobacco:

> A positive parent-child relationship is characterized by parents providing positive feedback through praise, encouragement, and physical affection. Positive relations appear to be a direct consequence of parents spending time with their children as well as having frequent communication, asking for their opinions, spending time talking, and sharing secrets and other concerns.

COMMUNICATIONS STYLES

All sorts of things influence the way we communicate: personality differences, family make-up, childhood and other life experiences, even gender. Deborah Tannen's book, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation,* explores the complex differences in the way American men and women communicate and how they expect others to respond to them.

Some people are outgoing, while others are shy. Some are very comfortable speaking with other people; others communicate better in writing. Some people "speak" with their hands, while others use facial expressions. Some speakers seek eye contact; others look around the room as they speak. Some emphasize a point by reaching out to touch their listener's arm or shoulder, while others are more reserved.

Many adults base their parenting styles on the way they were raised, though some people make a conscious effort to raise their children differently. Family communications have the same roots. Some parents recall that they were encouraged to speak freely with adults in their household. Others remember that they were expected to remain quiet in respect of their elders. Many adults still remember vividly their first "facts of life" talk with their parents. And most of us can remember whether and how our parents made their expectations clear about alcohol and other drug use.

Communication styles vary with different cultures and types of family structures. For example, immigrants from other countries who are learning to speak English must contend with language and cultural differences. Parents must learn a new language, one that their children are often more fluent with than they are. And they must discover the opportunities and risks their children face in their new country.

In terms of family structures, stepparents and stepchildren may have to navigate carefully early in your new relationship until you become comfortable communicating with each

other. Older adults raising grandchildren may need to communicate differently with your grandchildren than you did with your children. Your grandchildren are growing up in a different world than your children did and likely need more explicit direction from you.

No matter what type of communication style prevails in your household, setting rules for your child and sharing your expectations are crucial. This takes more than a one-time discussion. It requires a determined, focused family conference about rules against alcohol and other drug use. Back up those rules with regular reminders and continuing discussion. We'll talk in more detail about those specifics shortly.

SETTING RULES AND CONSEQUENCES

The first step in communicating your family rules and consequences is to agree on what those rules should be. In households where two or more adults share parenting responsibilities, you should agree up-front about those standards. When children spend time in different households, adults should try to agree to enforce those important rules consistently. If that is not possible, you need to take extra care that your child understands your household rules still stand when she is at home with you.

> "We have always tried to communicate to our children that our rules were for their safety and well being and not that we did not trust them. That we did not want them to get into a situation that was unsafe or that they couldn't handle. We also wanted them to be able to call us anytime they did not feel safe and we would come immediately. As a result, we have had few incidents and they never lost our trust."

Some family rules are nonnegotiable. They should be established by the adults in your household and then shared with your child. Some examples of nonnegotiable rules:

- No one under age 21 in this household may drink alcohol.
- No one in this household will drive after having more than one alcoholic drink.
- No one in this household will accept a ride with someone who has been drinking.
- Smoking and using illegal drugs are off-limits in this family.
- You may not attend parties where alcohol is served to people under age 21 or where illegal drugs are available.
- You may not attend parties in your friends' home when their parents or guardians are not there.
- If any of your friends smoke cigarettes, they cannot smoke in our house.

listening: the other side of communicating

Sure, you need to talk about alcohol and other drugs, your expectations, and family rules. But you also need to listen to your child. How well are you keeping up with your child's current interests, likes, and dislikes? Take this quiz to find out. If you're feeling brave, make a copy and ask your child to fill it out separately. Then you can compare answers. Otherwise, pose these questions nonchalantly to your child over the next few days and see for yourself how closely your responses match.

MY CHILD'S FAVORITE...

...type of family outing:

_____

...outdoor pastime or sport:

_____

...type of music (extra points if you can name a performer):

_____

...book or magazine:

_____

...movie or TV show:

_____

...teacher:

_____

...school subject:

_____

...place to shop:

_____

...place to eat out:

_____

...relative (besides me, of course):

_____

...friend or friends:

_____

...place to hang out with friends:

_____

...way to spend a rainy day:

_____

...current interest in future trade or profession:

_____

Many professionals who work with families advocate active listening. That term emphasizes that listening is not a passive process. It requires that you give your full attention as your child speaks. Pay attention to your child's body language as well as to the words he uses. Try not to interrupt with questions and comments, except for encouraging phrases to indicate that you are listening. Avoid judgmental responses. Instead rephrase your child's comments in your own words to demonstrate that you understand his point of view. If you haven't used active listening before, try it. You'll find that your child is more comfortable talking when you show how willing you are to listen without immediately injecting your own opinions and advice.

Because monitoring is so crucial to protecting your child from alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use, family rules about keeping you informed about where your child is and whom she's with should be nonnegotiable. Here are some examples:

- You may accept invitations to a party at a friend's house after I've called to make sure the parents will be there.
- You may not accept a car ride from an older friend or your friends' friends or siblings without my permission. The exception is when a friend's sibling gives you a ride home from their house, and then you must come straight home.
- Whenever you go out with friends, I need to know where you are going, who you are going with, how you are getting there, and when you will be home.
- Whenever possible, leave a phone number where I can reach you in case of an emergency.
- If your plans change while you are out with friends, you need to call me to let me know where you are going, who you are going with, how you are getting there, and when you will be home.

"Jon's a great negotiator," says his father Allen. "He's very good at trying to get things to happen and at coming up with reasons why things should happen his way." Allen and his partner Steve have demonstrated their willingness to listen to Jon's lobbying. But when they make a decision, they try to be consistent about sticking to it.

At age 12, Jon is old enough to be dropped off at the mall for an hour or two with friends, his parents have decided. "He's always been respectful of the requirements that we need to know where he's at, who he's going to be with, and that an adult will be there when he's at someone's house."

Even nonnegotiable rules should be open for discussion, suggest Laurence Steinberg and Ann Levine in their book *You and Your Adolescent: A Parent's Guide for Ages 10-20:*

> When parents show respect for their teenager's point of view, are willing to discuss rules and regulations, and explain why they have to insist on this or forbid that, the adolescent is much less likely to rebel. She may not always like your final decision. But if she sees that you have thought about her point of view and have good reasons for saying no, she will at least see you as fair.

Parents are within their rights to expect to be treated with respect. One afternoon, 12-year-old Jon called home to ask if he could go to a friend's house after school. The family rules were that Jon should not call home from school except for emergencies and that he should make after-school arrangements the evening before. When his father Steve reminded him of those

rules and turned down his request, Jon persisted and finally became rude. At that, Steve ended the conversation by informing Jon he would be grounded for being disrespectful.

At first, Jon's reaction was disbelief at what he considered too harsh a consequence for his infraction. But, as his other dad Allen notes, "It made a point with Jon and with his friends and other parents who asked why Jon was grounded. It made an impression on his friends that disrespect is not tolerated."

To some extent, other rules and consequences can be negotiable. Decide first how much leeway you're comfortable with and then ask for your child's input in setting these guidelines. As Steinberg and Levine note, "Preteens and teens who are involved in the rule-making process are less likely to break the rules, or to cry unfair when you impose a penalty."

For instance, your seventh grader gets home from school about an hour before you leave work each day. He's demonstrated enough responsibility that you trust him to come straight home and dig in on the afternoons he's got homework. For other days, you decide to establish some guidelines together. Your after-school rules may sound something like this:

- You can stop off at the bakery on the way home.
- You can have one friend-either Kyle or Cody-walk home from school with you. If you want to invite a different friend, you need to clear that with me first. (In many cases, family rules may prohibit having any friends over when no parent is at home.)
- You can walk to Kyle or Cody's house, because their parents have told us that's OK. If you want to walk home with a different friend, you need to clear that with me first.
- You can have only one friend walk home with you, and you shouldn't go to anyone else's home with more than your friend unless your friend's parent is at home.
- Always call me at work to let me know when you get home or to your friend's home.

Your child's after-school freedom may be contingent on bringing home a good report card or keeping up with assigned chores. In general, try to keep exceptions to a minimum. The simpler the rules, the more likely your child will comply with them.

Negotiable rules may have some leeway for adjustment as your child matures and demonstrates responsibility. As Steinberg and Levine note, "The ultimate goal of the parent-adolescent partnership is autonomy," but you reach that goal in stages. Revise the rules as your child ages and shows good judgment. For instance, as an eighth-grader, your daughter can only go to the mall with her friends if you or another parent drives them and picks them up at an established time later. By the time she's in high school, you may be willing to let her ride the bus to the mall as long as you agree in advance when she will be home.

Along with rules, you need to establish up-front the consequences of violating those guidelines. Be as concrete as you can, and whenever possible, tie the consequence closely to the rule. For instance, the consequence for not keeping you informed of after-school plans might be that your child comes straight home from school without a friend for the next two weeks. Be ready to invoke that consequence when your child arrives home from a new friend's house a half hour after you do and protests, "I forgot!"

Consequences should reflect the importance of the rules and help to reinforce the reasons for them. If your child goes from one friend's house to another's Saturday afternoon without calling to let you know, the consequence might be to spend the next weekend at home. But if you discover your child attended an unsupervised party where alcohol was served, the consequences would be more severe.

Jon hates Sunday school, but because he made a commitment to attend this year, Allen and Steve insist that he make it on most weekends. One Sunday morning after a sleepover with friends, Jon rode home with his father, agreeing silently when Allen commented on the quiet Sunday before them. "I had forgotten all about Sunday school, but Jon didn't. He just didn't want to remind me," Allen says.

At home, Jon was making plans to get together with friends that afternoon when Allen suddenly remembered Sunday school. He asked Jon about it, and his son replied honestly that he was hoping it wouldn't come up. "If I'd mentioned to you, what would have happened?" Jon asked. "You'd be at Sunday school," his dad replied. "Exactly," Jon said.

The result was that Jon did not make his afternoon rendezvous with friends, A consequence that upset him at first. Later, though, Jon told his father, "I'm sorry I didn"t mention it." Owning up to what you do and approaching things honestly is another sometimes tough, but important lesson, his father notes.

Communicate your family rules and consequences simply and clearly. Hold a family meeting to go over them the first time and work out any negotiable rules. Some parents write their family rules down to emphasize their importance, while others make them into a contract that both parents and children can sign.

Don't be a broken record, but take opportunities to remind your child about those guidelines. When your child heads out to a friend's house on a Saturday afternoon, it doesn't hurt to add, "Remember to call me if you end up going somewhere else. And be home by five!"

talking about "lo bueno, lo malo"

Talking with her children about "lo bueno, lo malo" — the good and the bad — is an everyday event in the home of Mercedes Alvarez.

Evening conversation is common for single-mom Mercedes and the three children who still live with her— the youngest of Mercedes' nine daughters, — Jaqueline, 15, and Felicia, 13, and son Travis, 3.

"We eat dinner together," she says, noting she can explain things to the children at the table. In addition to meals, Mercedes also takes advantage of the time transporting the children to school in the morning and family outings to the park to talk with her children.

"I've talked with them about drugs," she says. "I tell them, 'no.'" Although Mercedes says she has the "vice" of smoking cigarettes, she strongly discourages her children from using tobacco, drinking or using illegal drugs.

Originally from Puerto Rico, Mercedes moved to Milwaukee from Minnesota seven months ago to be closer to her sister and other friends. This change has caused Mercedes to establish a new family rule: "No sales (You don't go out at night)." Believing "la calle" (the street) at night in a big city is no place for teens, Mercedes says she's made clear her expectation that her two teenage daughters be home by 7 or 8 p.m., and be ready for bed by 10 p.m.

She also pays attention to parties they attend and tries to set a good example on the occasions when she herself goes out. If Mercedes goes to a dance with friends, for example, she might have a "copita" — a little bit to drink, but "no es eso de emborrachar" (it's not the idea to get drunk).

If her children get stressful about not going out as much as they were in Minnesota, Mercedes says she tries to help them find a safe alternative, whether it's listening to music or watching TV. "I talk to them," she says.

TALKING ABOUT ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS

Alcohol and other drug education is a lot more common in schools than it was when you were a child. Still, you can't depend on your child's teachers to get this crucial information across by themselves. For every fact he hears in school about alcohol and other drugs, he's likely to hear a conflicting message from classmates, in movies, and in advertisements.

In health class, he learns that alcohol impairs coordination and clouds judgment. In movies, he sees drunken teenagers giggling as they wobble through a party scene. Your daughter's coach warns the team that smoking will leave them short of breath and low on energy. Competing with that message are ads in her favorite magazine depicting female smokers as beautiful, thin, and sophisticated. As a parent, it's your job to reinforce prevention messages and help your child learn to assess critically images that promote smoking, drinking, and other drug use as the path to popularity and glamour.

You don't have to launch your own nightly lecture series. Neither should you shy away from talking about alcohol and other drugs at the risk of boring or exasperating your child. Protecting him from alcohol and other drugs is a crucial job, and it's worth risking rolled eyes and sighs of impatience to get it done.

Take opportunities as they present themselves to reinforce family rules and talk about alcohol and drug hazards for young people. "Teachable moments" often pop up during TV commercials, while listening to the car radio on the way to the mall, or when walking the dog together in the evening. When your son brings up topics related to alcohol and other drugs, listen attentively and make comments to show your interest and to clarify information. Don't turn it into an inquisition, or your child may be reluctant to be so candid in the future. Here's an example:

> Nick: Isaac said he heard that those fake tattoos you wet and stick on can have drugs in them. That would be weird if a bunch of kids got a hold of them accidentally, licked them and freaked out.
>
> Mom: Well, I've read that LSD is sold on little pieces of paper that people chew, so I guess you could take the drug by licking one of those tattoos. Did Isaac say that might be happening around here?
>
> Nick: I don't know ... He didn't say.
>
> Mom: I guess there'd be no way of knowing if a tattoo was contaminated with a drug. You couldn't tell by looking. And even if you got it from a friend, he might not know there was something wrong with it.

Nick: You aren't supposed to lick them anyway. You're supposed to wet them with a cloth or something wet and stick them on.

Mom: That's true. The best way to protect yourself is not to put anything like that in your mouth.

Make sure you have your facts straight, but don't get overly technical. Be as specific as possible, and focus on the issues that matter most to your child. For most kids, the potential for lung cancer 20 or 30 years after you start smoking is too distant to make an impact. But your daughter may be put off by the fact that smoking would make her breath and clothing stink and that she'd run out of steam playing basketball.

Liver damage is a long-term hazard of alcoholism; the fact that excessive binge drinking can kill you is something teenagers need to know. Injecting drugs with a needle someone else has used exposes drug users to AIDS. Illegal street drugs may contain dangerous impurities and are sometimes misrepresented as a different drug. Using inhalants can cause irreversible brain damage. Adolescents need to hear these facts from someone they trust.

You can help lay broader misconceptions about drug use to rest. For instance, many adolescents believe alcohol and other drug use by people their age is more widespread than it actually is. If your child believes everyone else is doing it, it may be more difficult for him to refuse alcohol and other drugs. The truth is that most preteens and teenagers don't smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, or use illegal drugs.

different strokes

Parents and children don't always share the same perceptions about alcohol and other drug use by young people. In a 1993 survey of parents and their teenagers, parents consistently underestimated the frequency of alcohol and other drug use by young people in their community when compared to their children's estimates. Parents were more likely to rate drug education efforts as effective. Teenagers rated peer advice as the most effective strategy.

Parents were more likely than teenagers to attribute drug use to negative causes, like boredom, rebelliousness, loneliness, and peer pressure. Teenagers were more likely to cite reasons like curiosity or fun. The study didn't report on whether the parents' or teenagers' estimates were closer to actual alcohol and other drug use statistics in the community. However, the survey points out the need for parents to learn more about alcohol and other drug abuse, effects on young people, and the prevalence of drug use by young people in their community.

WRITING THE 'NO THANKS' SCRIPT

The "Just Say No" campaign of a few years back was a good start, but the fact is that saying no sometimes isn't enough. Your monitoring efforts will go a long way to ensure that your child does not end up often in situations where alcohol and other drugs are available. But at some point in his preteen and teen years, your child is likely to face persistent offers to try a cigarette, have a drink, or smoke a joint. You can help build his refusal skills by rehearsing with him what he'd say in those situations.

Some kids are comfortable with a simple "no thanks," but others may need a variety of refusal comebacks. Your child may be relieved if you offer yourself as the best excuse, as in: "I'd better not. My parents would ground me for life." Here are some other possibilities:

"Sorry, that's not my style. I want to stay in control."

"You want me to drink that so I'll lose control and barf all over the place? That's not my idea of fun."

"No, thanks. I've got a big game tomorrow, and I want to play my best."

"You talkin' to me? You know I don't do that stuff."

"I'm not into breaking the law."

"Better not. I don't want to have to use that 'I didn't inhale' excuse when I run for president."

"My parents would smell that on my breath from a mile away. I'll pass."

"Can't. I've got an image to maintain."

"Sorry, it's against my religion."

"This is the only brain I've got, and it's my job to take care of it."

Use the list above as a discussion starter and encourage your child to come up with responses she feels comfortable using.

ADVICE TO PARENTS: RESIST ADVISING

Family research is clear that adolescents value guidance from parents on alcohol and other drugs. But the way you offer that guidance affects how effectively your message is heard. Have you seen your child's eyes glaze over during a conversation when you begin issuing commands ("Do this.") or advice ("I think you should try that.")? We've spent a lot of time in this publication telling you that your child needs to hear your expectations and rules against alcohol and other drug use. We've noted that information about the dangers of alcohol and other drug use will have great impact when it comes from you. Now we need to note that how you share your expectations and information about alcohol and other drugs is also crucial.

It's natural to want to give advice to your child. You have years of wisdom to share. Had you known as a teenager what you know now, you might have avoided a lot of mistakes and heartache. You may believe that by sharing your insights you can protect your child: "It doesn't matter what your friends think." (In fact, it does matter to preteens and teenagers.) "Ten years from now, these problems will seem so insignificant." (But they are big problems now.) You can't protect your child from all the pangs of adolescence. Those pangs are part of growing up, and everyone has to negotiate them in his or her own way.

> *"Once, my oldest daughter received a phone call from a friend asking her to go to a local bar that was a teen dance club on Wednesdays. She covered the phone and whispered "Say NO!" (She did not want to do this) Then she took her hand off the phone and asked "Mom, can I go to Bruisers?" I paused a moment and said, "No." She reported to her friend that she couldn't go because her parents wouldn't let her and then happily hung up. We are always willing to be the "bad guys."*

Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish, authors of *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk*, have this to say about parental advice:

> When you give immediate advice to children, they either feel stupid ("Why didn't I think of that myself?"), resentful ("Don't tell me how to run my life!"), or irritated ("What makes you think I didn't think of that myself?").
>
> When a child figures out for herself what she wants to do, she grows in confidence and is willing to assume responsibility for her decision.

That doesn't mean you should ignore your child's problems, but listening as he talks through his dilemma may result in a better solution than immediately offering advice. Faber and Mazlish suggest that you:

1. Help your child sort out his thoughts and feelings.

2. Restate the problem as a question.

3. Point out other resources he can use to figure out a solution.

After your child has had a chance to sort through his feelings and options, you can offer a suggestion in a way that makes it clear he decides on the best solution: "What would happen if...?" "Here's another possibility..." "I wonder if this might work..."

In *You and Your Adolescent*, authors Steinberg and Levine call commands, sermons, and advice "obvious turn-offs, especially to adolescents who are struggling for autonomy."

> "When you tell adolescents 'If I were you, I'd do X, Y, or Z' or 'What you should do is...,' you are communicating that they aren't capable of solving their own problems," the authors warn.

A clear difference between communicating effectively with your child and offering unwanted advice is in the timing. It's fine to make your expectations and rules clear when your family is discussing alcohol and other drugs. But when your child comes to you with a specific problem ("All my friends say Anna is so cool because she brags about drinking with her boyfriend"), you might be better off listening and encouraging your child to sort out her feelings before you start suggesting solutions.

PARENTS AS ROLE MODELS

You've had several discussions with your child about alcohol and other drugs. You've established and communicated clear family rules and consequences. You feel like you have a positive, open relationship, and you encourage your child to talk over questions and problems. What's left to consider? Think about the way you use alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs and your role as a model of drinking and drug-using behavior.

Studies have demonstrated that parents' drinking behavior and favorable attitudes about drinking are positively associated with adolescents' initiating and continuing drinking. That doesn't mean you're a hypocrite if you have an occasional drink even though your family rules prohibit drinking by your teenager. Alcohol use by adults is legal, and parents who drink occasionally and moderately can provide an example of responsible alcohol use by adults. One parent suggests that parents' jobs in keeping their children safe from alcohol and other drugs are "the role models you present, how openly you communicate and how you demonstrate the value your child has as a person." "That's probably one reason why I'm still at home: to be their for my kids and to provide supervision," she adds.

The "Whose Kids? ...Our Kids!" newsletter offers these guidelines for parents to model appropriate use of alcohol:

- Don't involve youth in your drinking: no getting a beer for you, no helping with mixing drinks, no serving drinks to guests. This goes for your 7-year-old as well as your 17-year-old.
- Be a model of responsible and moderate drinking. Children should never see a parent drunk.
- Don't use drinking as an escape or as proof of being an adult.

- Don't place pressure on a family member or guest to drink.

- Communicate drinking as morally neutral. It's neither virtuous nor evil.

(From the newsletter, "Whose Kids? ...Our Kids," October 1996, published by the Teen Assessment Project (TAP), a program of the University of Wisconsin-Extension and UW-Madison School of Human Ecology.)

Statistics also indicate that many teenagers who smoke cigarettes have a parent who smokes. If you smoke cigarettes, the best message you can send your child is to quit. The harder it is for you to quit, the more powerful message you send your child about how addictive smoking can be.

If you find quitting too difficult, you should be open about the fact that you understand the health risks of tobacco. Tell your child you would like to quit smoking, but nicotine is very addictive. Let your child know you hope he never has to deal personally with this addiction.

Consider, too, how you use prescription and over-the-counter medications. Regularly taking a pill to cope with stressful situations, to stay awake, or to get to sleep communicates that drugs are a good solution for everyday situations.

Another dilemma parents sometimes face is answering questions about whether they ever used illegal drugs. "Did you ever smoke pot, Mom?" is a question parents who did would rather not have to deal with. In its guide *Keeping Youth Drug-Free*, the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention suggests that this discussion can be an effective way to communicate about alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs. The key is to:

- Take it slowly and think through your response.

- Listen to your child's questions and reactions to your responses.

- Elicit feedback.

- Make sure your child hears the central message you want to communicate.

The CSAP publication provides this dialogue in an example of a 12-year-old who comes home after a drug education lesson and asks a parent if he ever used drugs. The parent begins by responding: "Wow, you're learning about drugs already? What are they teaching you?"

> Child: Well, just about drugs and alcohol, and the teacher said a lot of people your age used drugs when they were young.
>
> You might say: Well, I'm not sure what your teacher meant to say, but I can tell you what I know about those times. Would you like me to? *(The parent/caregiver offers a choice here, because some kids might prefer to keep their knowledge general and not specific to their parent/caregiver. Others, of course, will forge on.)*

Child: Sure.

You might say: Well, many people my age, who were young adults back then, tried marijuana. We mostly called it pot. But we didn't know as much about it as we do now. It was the same with cigarettes. We didn't think smoking was very harmful either. So do you still want to know if I smoked marijuana? How will you feel if I say yes? *(By now, the conversation may be opening up.)*

Child: I'll have to think about it. Well, yes and no. Yes, because you always say it's important to be honest. No, because I'm not sure what I'll think about you. If you say no, you'll just be another regular parent. If you say yes, I don't know, that would be kind of weird.

You might say: You're exactly right. That's why I wanted you to think about it. But remember, whatever you decide is okay, and whatever my answer is, we can talk more about it. *(Many opportunities have opened between you and your child even prior to your answering the original question. That's more than half the battle in helping kids resist drugs and alcohol-a strong parental connection, even if a sometimes rocky one, always helps the child.)*

Child: Are you just trying not to tell me?

You: No, I'm trying to be thoughtful about how I answer you so I'll know more about what you think about my drug usage.

Child: So you did?

You: Yes, I tried it. A couple of times because friends of mine were doing it. And then I stopped because I decided it just wasn't a good thing to do. *(It's important to make a distinction between past adolescent or young adult use/experimentation and current adult usage. You should not divulge current use unless directly confronted by the child. You should seek help for yourself and the child in dealing with this situation.)*

You: So what do you think?

Child: About what?

You: About my saying I used it but then stopped.

Child: Oh, it's okay. I don't know.

You: Are you wondering if I would give you permission or think it's okay to use drugs because I tried them?

Child: Well, if you tried them, what's the big deal?

You: Well, whether or not I used is not the main issue here. The main issue is you. I definitely do not want you to use alcohol, marijuana, or any other illicit drugs. I'm not going to give you a lecture about how bad they are for you because you've probably come to learn a lot about them in class. But, I want you to think about this: you-plain and simple-don't need them. You have too much going for you. Drugs don't really help anything. They don't solve problems. They won't make you popular. They won't help you grow up. And they surely won't help you build a strong body and mind. In fact, just the opposite can happen. Now go ahead and get ready for soccer practice — that's something that makes you feel good about yourself.

This conversation could go in different directions, and if you have one like it, you should use words you feel comfortable with. The example above demonstrates the importance of listening to your child and placing the emphasis on your expectations for him.

Del says she and Steve have talked a lot with their children, Alex, 16, and Mikaela, 11, about alcohol and other drugs, "but I can't say we've ever lectured them. I think the most important think you can do as parents is to model behavior that's appropriate."

Toward that end, Steve and Del never drink and drive. They drink alcohol rarely and then in moderation. "I don't think they've ever seen us have more than two drinks," Del says. Alcohol may be served to adults at family and social gatherings in their home, but again moderation is the key. Mikaela and Alex have occasionally heard their grandmother admonish grandfather, I'm going to drive home if you have another drink."

The topic of problems caused by alcohol and other drugs often comes up when Del or Steve read aloud about an incident reported in the newspaper. "Alex is very open about telling us who at school smokes or drinks, and he has very strong opinions about that. He talks about how stupid it is," Del says. "We appreciate his willingness to talk about it."

"One time I asked him what he thought would happen if he ever did anything like that," she adds. "He thought for just a second and said, 'I'd be in trouble, of course.'"

Some young people are more comfortable talking with someone who is not their parent or guardian about sensitive topics like alcohol and other drugs. If that's the case with your child,

try not to show hurt feelings and encourage your child to talk with another caring adult. In some Native American tribes, for example, extended families, including aunts, uncles, and grandparents, play a role in raising children. Young people are comfortable seeking the counsel of their aunts and uncles as well as their parents.

EXTENDING COMMUNICATION OUTSIDE THE FAMILY

Your child's friends: As peers take on increased importance in your child's life, it is tempting to want to help her choose the "right" friends. You'd like your child to associate with young people whose families seem to share the same values as yours. Of course, you want her to steer clear of teenagers who smoke, drink alcohol, use illegal drugs, and engage in other risky behaviors.

In reality, interfering with your child's friendships is often counterproductive. Attempts to dictate whom your child chooses as friends will be met with frustration and resentment. Your job as a parent is to focus on making your expectations and family values clear to your child. If you have accomplished that task, your child will feel most comfortable with other young people who share those values. In weird hairstyles and grungy clothing, they may not look like your interpretation of fine, upstanding youth. But all of us have made the mistake of judging someone on the basis of appearance, haven't we?

It's important to take time to get to know your child's friends and to make them feel welcome in your home. As essential as parental monitoring is, what better place for your child and his friends to hang out than at your house? Especially if you are one of the few parents in your child's circle of friends who is home after school and during school breaks, offer your house as a gathering spot — under your supervision, of course.

Don't assume that because they've reached adolescence, your child's friends would rather not talk with you. Like younger children, preteens and teenagers bask in adult attention. They like to talk with adults who are willing to listen. Establishing yourself as one of those adults will help you keep in touch with your child's everyday life and offer insight about how other parents deal with monitoring and family rules.

Connecting with other parents: Whenever possible, get to know the parents of your child's friends as well. When your child was younger, you might not have felt comfortable letting him visit a friend's home unless you went along the first time and met the friend's parents. You probably welcomed parents who wanted to give you the same once-over. Such precautions may seem a little out-of-step when your child reaches his teens, although there's nothing wrong with accompanying him to the front door the first time you give him a ride to a new friend's house.

Mary Jo insists on meeting the parents of friends where her children are spending the night to make sure a responsible adult will be on hand. "As they get bigger, kids don't have as many

physical needs parents have to help them with, but emotionally they still need our attention and support," she notes. For Mary Jo's children, that support may take the form of being there to listen about a friend "hanging around with the wrong kind of kids" or the pressure on teenage girls to become sexually active. "Those are hard things to deal with, and I tell my kids that," she says. "I told my son, 'It's great that you're concerned about your friend, but don't let yourself get sucked into a bad situation.'"

There are other ways to meet the parents of your child's friends. Introduce yourself to other parents in the stands at your child's athletic and musical events and to people who are familiar faces at church, around town, and at school drop-off points. You can meet other parents at scouting meetings and school open houses. Other adults will likely be as curious to put a face with the name of their children's friend's parents as you are. Once you've introduced yourself to other parents, it will be easier for you to call and make sure their children's parties are supervised and to compare rules about curfews and monitoring.

Beyond your child's immediate circle of friends, most communities offer other support systems for parents of adolescents. Your parent/teacher association, local health clinics, and community organizations often sponsor workshops and lectures for parents. Counselors at your child's school are happy to talk with you about specific issues and refer you to resources and organizations that can supply more information. Your church also may offer discussion groups for parents.

MIXED MEDIA MESSAGES

Research is mixed about how much influence TV, magazines, the Internet, and other media have on the decisions your child makes. Some studies suggest that alcohol ads may influence young people to be more favorably predisposed to drinking. Surveys about cigarette ads indicated that the now-defunct cartoon character Joe Camel was very popular with preteens and teenagers.

An effective way to help your child resist messages that smoking, drinking, and using drugs are the path to popularity and fun is to confront those falsehoods. Help your child develop critical thinking skills. For instance, you and your son see a beer ad on TV in which a character suggests that viewers "think when you drink." You might add, "Actually, you'd better think before you drink. And a lot of people need to think about whether they should even drink at all." A movie character arrives home from a tough day at work and immediately heads for the liquor cabinet. You might remark sarcastically, "Oh, that's going to make everything OK." Point out the flaws in those implicit messages and encourage your child to look for them, too. Talking about those hidden messages can help reinforce information about the dangers of alcohol and other drug use by young people.

'liberated' parenting: a profile of the quattlebaum family

Like many parents of teenagers, Dorothy and Willie Quattlebaum have occasional disagreements with their daughter La-Dreya, now 18, and son Jairay, 16. "I let them know I'm not going away," Dorothy says. "They're not old enough or mature enough to make all the decisions that come their way on their own. When I see my guidance is needed, I will step in."

Dorothy's job as a foster parent allows her to work at home and keep a flexible schedule. She volunteers at school and joins in special events, such as chaperoning her daughter's senior class trip to Atlanta.

"Someone has to mind the children," she says. "I know we live in a world where you need three or four incomes to make it. My first priority is to be a parent, but I've got bills to pay as well."

Instead of establishing a long list of rules about where their teenagers can go and how long they can stay out, Dorothy runs the household "on a day-to-day basis." La-Dreya and Jairay do have curfews, but if they check in advance, they may get an OK to stay out later for special occasions. In fact, Dorothy's one rule not to be broken is that she be kept informed about where her teenagers are and who they're with.

"We have car phones, pagers — they know to call me. And if they don't, they know not even to ask for anything tomorrow," Dorothy says. "My main concern is that they come home safe and in one piece."

Dorothy recalls her own strict upbringing and contrasts it with the relative freedom her teenagers have. She views her parenting style as "liberated." Although she and Willie do not always agree on parenting decisions ("Willie is stricter than I am," she says), they always talk through their decisions. Even though — or perhaps because — the Quattlebaums give their teenagers a wide rein to go out with friends, "it's funny how much they like to stay close to home," she says.

"I trust my kids to make good decisions, and they know as long as they check in about their plans, it's probably going to be OK," Dorothy adds. "They know the lines of communication are always open, and I think they feel like, 'Why should I screw up?'"

Like all teenagers, La-Dreya and Jairay don't always make the wisest choices. But Dorothy contends that "sometimes you just have to sit back and let your kids be kids" — as long as they're not putting themselves or others in danger. On those occasions when she overhears or sees something questionable, Dorothy usually avoids direct and immediate intervention "although I may make a point to talk about it later."

La-Dreya and Jairay entertain their friends often at home, and the Quattlebaum home is a popular place for teenagers to congregate after school. Dorothy believes it's important to get to know her children's friends and welcome them in the family's home. She even went to La-Dreya's prom to see her daughter and friends in their formal attire and admire the decorations.

Of her involvement in her children's lives, Dorothy says, "You can even call it snooping

if you want, but that's a parent's responsibility."

On the other hand, "if you set up too many rules, you can make your life and theirs miserable with too many limitations," Dorothy says. "Our job as parents is to establish our expectations and let the kids decide how to achieve them."

Doing well in school is one of the Quattlebaums' expectations for their children, but Dorothy resists the temptation to hound her children to get their homework done. It's up to them to schedule their after-school and weekend time to complete school assignments — even if that means pulling an occasional all-nighter.

Dorothy and Willie remain active with a network of about 20 other families whose children have attended school together since kindergarten. The families hold monthly workshops, socialize and often call each other to talk about their children. For example, "when my daughter wants to do something that I'm not comfortable with, I know I can call another mother and ask, 'What do you think about this?'"

The Quattlebaums live in the same block where Dorothy grew up, across the street from her parents, so multiple generations of the family remain close. Dorothy and Willie and occasionally the teenagers dine once a week with either her parents or his family.

The family's proximity makes Christmas a special time. "We celebrate Christmas about 30 days out of the month of December," Dorothy says with a laugh. Different households have a friendly competition over Christmas decorating, and they get together for holiday brunches throughout the month.

Alcohol and other drugs occasionally come up in daily conversations at the Quattlebaum house. The teenagers are aware of which of their peers choose to drink or use other drugs and how to steer clear of parties or other settings where those substances will be available, Dorothy says.

Dorothy and Willie talk to their children about avoiding alcohol and other drug use in the context of making responsible choices and staying focused on what they want to accomplish in their lives. "I tell them I can't see why people would choose to let that kind of pain or burden in their lives," she says.

A word about advertising messages. You may see a TV ad that makes no sense to you, but it may have greater impact on your child. Even in a mass media like TV, advertisers tend to target very specific audiences. Many messages today aren't intended for parents but for people in their teens and twenties, and they can be remarkably effective in delivering their message to the intended audience.

When your child was younger, you probably found it much easier to establish limits on what they watched on TV and how much time they spent watching it. Your continued efforts to impose limits will likely meet with more resistance as your child approaches and enters adolescence. You may hear protests: "But, Dad, all my friends have seen this movie." "Why can't I watch that TV show? Everybody will be talking about it at school tomorrow!" TV and movie ratings provide some guidance to parents, and you can certainly prescreen TV shows and videos to make your own assessment. An added consideration is that your child may be watching programs and videos at a friend's house that you would not permit at home. Thus, the need to help your child develop critical thinking skills is crucial no matter how much TV and movie screening you do at home.

THE WIDE-OPEN WEB

The Internet has introduced an exciting new, and sometimes troublesome, medium for many families. Access to the information superhighway puts a virtually endless source of often hard-to-find data at your fingertips. Your child can use it to track down information for school reports and to explore new interests. You can use it to plan family trips, locate parenting resources, and find current information about alcohol and other drugs.

A key warning about the Internet is that this medium is packed with biased messages and distorted information. Anyone can post information in a chat room or on a World Wide Web page. Many web sites are simply billboards from advertisers who have no responsibility to provide a balanced message. Other sites provide downright false information. If you want to find out firsthand, try searching the web for information on alcohol and other drugs. Along with information from scientifically valid sources, you're likely to find web sites promoting illegal drug use.

Other media, such as television and radio, must comply with federal regulations about content. Newspapers and magazines that appeal to a general audience build their reputation on providing accurate information. They must answer to their subscribers and advertisers when they do not. For better or for worse, the Internet has none of those controls. Thus, a central caution when using the Internet is to consider the source. You and your child need to identify who is providing the information made available over the Internet. Answer these questions:

- How qualified is that source to make the claims presented?
- Where does the information presented on the site come from?
- Who sponsors the site? What interest does the sponsor have in making the information available to you?

Much controversy has centered on sexually explicit sites on the Internet, but that should not be your only concern in setting limits about how, when, and why your child "surfs the net." Again, this is a situation where critical thinking skills are important. The Internet is definitely an arena where you can't believe everything you read. A healthy attitude to foster is, "Oh, yeah? Says who?" A healthy precaution is to make sure your adolescent surfs under your supervision. Instead of putting the computer in his bedroom, why not place it in the family room or another common room where you can stroll by as your child uses the Internet to check in occasionally.

A FINAL WORD

It may take some real effort on your part to put these ways of communicating to use in your family. Active listening takes practice. Staying current on alcohol and other drug information requires a time commitment. Wanting to help your child is a natural urge for most parents, and offering advice seems like a logical way to fulfill that urge. We all run out of patience sometimes, get angry over trivial matters, and say things occasionally that might hurt other people's feelings. That's part of being human, and it happens to both you and your child.

Not every conversation you have with your child will end positively, but neither will one conversation make or break your relationship. If you listen to your child as well as talk, show her that you care, share your pride in her aspirations and accomplishments, you will enjoy an open and supportive relationship that will help protect her from alcohol and other drugs.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION ON FAMILIES, ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUG ABUSE PREVENTION, CONTACT...

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information
P.O. Box 2345
Rockville, MD 20847-2345
800-729-6686
http://www.health.org

Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America
911 North Pitt St., Suite 300
Alexandria, VA 22314
800-542-2322

Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD)
511 East John Carpenter Freeway, Suite 700
Irving, TX 75062
800-GET-MADD

National Asian-Pacific American Families Against Substance Abuse
1887 Maplegate Street
Monterey Park, CA 91755
213-278-0031

National Black Child Development Institute
463 Rhode Island Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20005
202-387-1281

National Coalition of Hispanic Health and Human Services Organizations
1501 16 Street, NW
Washington, DC 20005
202-387-5000

National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence
12 West 21st St., 7th Floor
New York, NY 10017
800-NCA-CALL

National Families in Action
2296 Henderson Mill Road, Suite 300
Atlanta, GA 30345
404-934-6364

National Family Partnership
11598 South Towne Square
St. Louis, MO 63123
314-845-1933

National PTA Drug and Alcohol Abuse
Prevention Project
330 N. Wabash Avenue, Suite 2100
Chicago, IL 60611-3690
312-670-6782

Office of Minority Health Resource Center
P.O. box 37337
Washington, DC 20013-7337
800-444-6472

Parents' Resource Institute for Drug Education, Inc. (PRIDE)
50 Hurt Plaza, Suite 210
Atlanta, GA 30303
800-677-7433

Search Institute
700 S. Third Street, Suite 210
Minneapolis, MN 5541
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www.search-institute.org

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